

What are the Information Needs of Communities & Citizens? As a new resident of this state, I am starving for news from the state capital, and I have been too busy to learn much about my local municipal government. I missed a local election forum last month because I was following too many national, international and "niche" media and lost track of my local news sources. The city's Web page didn't have news about the election campaign, presumably to remain non-partisan. The regional daily (published three counties away) has some local news, but I don't subscribe. A local twice-weekly has been so thin that I haven't made it a habit, but I may now that I'm upset with myself about the election. I found the best write-up on the election forum in stacks of photocopied paper at the library! I assume it was a League of Women Voters transcript, but it didn't have a clear address. For emergency info, the city has a telephone alert service, and I subscribe. So does the local university, where I teach, but I unsubscribed when it woke me at 3 a!

.m. with a false alarm about a prowler in a dormitory.

How is Commercial Media Serving Your Community?

I live in western Virginia and can't get home delivery of the Washington Post or The New York Times. I can get (and do get) the Wall St. Journal; I could get the Roanoke Times, but it seems pretty thin on both state-capitol reporting and my city's local news, so I don't bother with it, except for checking its online edition a few times a week.

"Local" TV news is mostly about the city three counties away where the stations originate; it gives me more weather and sports (and crime and accidents) than I need. If I want that information, I can look it up online. A stronger local news component on NPR Morning Edition would reach me; so would the local paper if it had enough reporters to provide a daily Web feed instead of an erratic twice-weekly paper. The TV stations' websites and the local twice-weekly newspaper use too much PR handout "news" verbatim. If there's local news on commercial radio, I haven't heard it.

I'd tune in to an intelligent TV discussion of local government and business issues with officials and experts, but that's nowhere to be found. The amount of "serial killer/pervert" crime drama, and the amount of advertising -- especially for drugs, sex-aids and dating services -- makes me want to throw something at the screen. This city just elected a new mayor, replacing a guy who had been on the job for 30 years. I've never heard either of them speak for more than ten minutes.

What is the State of Noncommercial, Nonprofit, and Public Media?

We have two public radio stations that provide a good mix of nationally syndicated content and some good regional music programming... Only one of them has a news department, mostly using freelancers, when they have the money to pay them. I catch a couple of good local reporters from time to time, but it's catch-as-catch-can between the national segment of Morning Edition.

I don't get cable or satellite TV, and the regional public television signal went away with the digital transition. I used to get both Virginia and West Virginia public TV, but with digital I can get only the Virginia station, and only if I physically change the configuration of the antenna from the position that brings in the local commercial stations. So now I'm more likely to watch Charlie Rose over the Web.

What is the Impact of the Internet and Mobile Information?

We do have a local online news operation trying to get non-profit status and scrape up some funding, but to have a readership it seems to be leaning more toward arts than public affairs. The city has a website, but not much in the way of staff to keep it up. I mentioned the lack of election data -- or even links to the state elections database, which IS online. Another example: Fourth of July is coming and there's a reminder about vendors' licenses on the city site, noting "Please see City Ordinance No. 1302 Sec. 50-58 for further details. " -- but there's no link to the ordinance.

The city has a GIS portal on its Web site, but it's not self-explanatory. It includes a crime incident map, which it says is updated monthly. I clicked on the map a few times and it all went blank.

Someone had the imagination to start municipal WiFi

(<http://www.marketwire.com/mw/rel.jsp?id=730162>

), but the mayor was against it, and the city didn't do it very well. It has been trying to sell it.

I wasn't here at the time, but I think the problem was they were competing with the university's on-campus wifi, and with the fact that students could leech off each other's cable or phone company wifi in densely populated apartment neighborhoods -- especially when "the neighbor's wifi" was not only "free," but more reliable than the city's wifi.

Meanwhile, the city has a website and an emergency alert system, but not much in the way of staff to update the information on the website. Police reports appear to be the absolute minimum under foia laws. After the election, the city website didn't link to any election statistics; it posted a paragraph of congratulations to the winners, and misspelled it "Contratulations"; And the "contact us" page comes up "page not found." <sigh>

My own access: I don't have cable TV; I don't have a landline phone. I have an EVDO modem for my computers, plus a Droid smartphone. (OK, so I'm an over-60 computer geek, not typical of anyone else.)

